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The Kremlin's ears

Experts say any Soviet abroad is potential informant

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Talk to a Soviet reporter, and your comments might wind up in the files of the KGB.

That's how the Soviet spy network operates, according to experts on Soviet intelligence. Everyone on the Soviet payroll is informing, and U.S. officials admit there's little to distinguish the "spies" from the "legitimate" professionals on the staffs of Soviet news agencies — or other branches of Soviet missions anywhere.

Thus the claim by British officials that 25 members of the Soviet Embassy in London were spies was no surprise to the State Department. They in-

cluded journalists, translators, trade representatives, a chauffeur and a security guard as well as eight diplomats — a cross-section of a mission dedicated to espionage.

For years, the State Department has charged that Soviet representatives here spend much of their time grabbing data for the Soviet intelligence mill. Their mission to the United Nations in New York is viewed as a center for Soviet intelligence.

And U.S. officials say privately the newly built Soviet Embassy, on a rise overlooking much of Washington, is ideally located for electronic surveillance of the inner workings of the U.S. government.

The difference between U.S.

claims and British spy charges, though, is that the British this time could hang their case on the word of a Soviet official, Oleg Gordievski, identified as a double agent.

"He's a very big fish," said Dmitri Simes of the Carnegie Endowment. "His knowledge will be very useful to the intelligence community."

"Most people don't realize how valuable it is when we get a defection like this," said former CIA Deputy Director Ray Cline in Washington. "He can tell you ... how the system works that confirm other data and research ... which require confirmation from inside sources."